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THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

BY J. M. POWIS SMITH

AN OUTLINE BIBLE-STUDY COURSE

[Those who desire to conduct classes or to have this course in separate form can secure reprints from the AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE, THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, at twenty-five cents for the course of five months. Leaders of classes will also be provided with a series of programs and suggestions, as well as lists of reference books, upon reporting classes to the INSTITUTE.]

STUDY III

THE TRIAL AND TRIUMPH OF FAITH

We are concerned for the next month with the Book of Job, which is quite generally recognized as the masterpiece of the world's literature. Is it not a significant fact that such a piece of literature was called forth by the problem of suffering? Let us first secure a view of the general plan of the Book of Job. It naturally submits to the following analysis: Chaps. 1 and 2 constitute the prologue to the discussion. Chaps. 3-26 form the great debate which resolves itself into three cycles of speeches, namely, chaps. 4-14 the first cycle, chaps. 15-21 the second, and chaps. 22-26 the third. The debate between the friends and Job is followed by a series of speeches on the part of Job himself, chaps. 27-31. Then a new character appears, namely, Elihu, whose speeches are contained in chaps. 32-37. The climax of the play is reached in the speeches of Jehovah contained in chaps. 38-41, to which Job replies in 42:1-6. The book is closed by the epilogue, 42:7-17.

First day.—§ 32. *The prologue.* Read Job 1:1-5, noting particularly the fact that Job is described as a man "perfect, and one that feared God and eschewed evil." The problem of the book, therefore, is not the question of suffering in general, but rather the question of the suffering of a righteous man. We are now in the field of the individual problem once more, continuing the line of thought started by Ezekiel. Read 1:6-12, noting that these proceedings in the heavenly court are of course unknown to Job and his friends. Observe the purpose of the test that is here proposed, namely, the desire to demonstrate whether or not Job's religion is unselfish and pure. Read 1:13-22, observing the avalanche of misfortune that descends upon Job with crushing force, and Job's acceptance of it all as coming from the hand of God, against whom he raises no syllable of protest.

Second day.—Read Job 2:1-6, noting that the heavenly decision is now made to push the test of Job to the last extreme short of taking his life. Does not Satan evidently expect that Job will be unable to stand the strain? Read 2:7-10, observing how Job stands unshaken in the presence of the most extreme personal suffering, and, in addition to that, is able to withstand the temptation coming from his wife from whom he had every right to expect supporting strength. Does

not the prologue offer one solution to the problem of suffering, namely this, that the presence of suffering in human experience is necessary in order to make possible the existence of a piety that is independent of material welfare? Could there be as high a grade of spirituality if the world were so organized that every good deed was unfailingly followed by a corresponding reward in the way of prosperity and happiness? Is not that type of piety more noble which is able to maintain itself and to grow even though there should seem to be no relation between inner character and outer fortune; yea, even if the fact of personal piety insures disaster and misfortune to the possessor of it?

Third day.—Read 2:11-13, in which Job's three friends are introduced. Is it not evident that these friends were kindly, pious men? Had they not come long distances to comfort their former friend? Had they anything to gain by such action? Do they not treat him with the most profound courtesy and sympathy by waiting until Job indicates his readiness to talk? Let us not forget the high character and the generous conduct of these men as we move on into the discussion itself.

Fourth day.—§ 33. Read chap. 3, noting the despair of spirit that has laid hold upon Job so that he is now desirous of death and wishes that he had never been born. What has produced this change in Job's attitude? Is it simply that he has broken down nervously under the long-continued strain of unmitigated pain? Or is the Job of this chapter and the following discussions a different person from the one presented to us in the prologue? That is to say, is it not possible that the prologue and the epilogue constituted an old story which has been greatly enriched by the addition of this magnificent discussion inserted in the middle of the old tale? If the prologue and the following discussion are from one and the same pen, we cannot fail to realize that the three friends of the prologue must have been deeply shocked by this new attitude on the part of Job. This was to them a new and inexplicable Job.

Fifth day.—§ 34. Read Job 4:1-9, observing the urbanity and courtesy of the speaker Eliphaz. Note particularly vss. 6-9, which constitute the substance of all that the friends have to say. These verses call to Job's attention the fact of his own personal integrity and ask him to bear in mind that no man of such unblemished character was ever destroyed. That was the teaching of experience and observation.

Sixth day.—Read 4:12-21, in which Eliphaz represents himself as having had a special revelation from God, the purport of which is that no man can be wholly sinless in the sight of God. It is therefore inevitable that all men should to some extent suffer. See how Eliphaz reasserts this thought in 5:6, 7.

Seventh day.—Read 5:17-27, observing that these beautiful words come from men whose whole point of view regarding suffering is to be shattered to fragments by the discussions which follow.

Eighth day.—§ 35. Read 6:8-13, noting Job's desire that his case might come before God even if it should result in his being destroyed, and how he here asserts unflinchingly his certainty that his past record has been above reproach. Read rapidly vss. 14-27, asking yourself if Job was really justified in making such charges against his friends. It would be well to remember these statements of Job when we find the friends retorting in kind.

Ninth day.—Read Job 7:17-22, in which Job calls in question the propriety and justice of God in dealing with him as he is doing.

Tenth day.—§ 36. Read Job 8:3-7, noting the certainty of Bildad that God acts in accordance with justice, and his suspicion that Job's sons were not as righteous as they might have been, and his daring assertion that Job himself is lacking in piety. Read Job 9:16-24, Job's answer, in which he does not hesitate to say that a righteous man has no chance with God; that the government of the world is not determined by moral considerations, and that God himself is the only one who in the last analysis can be held responsible for the chaotic situation. Read 10:3-7, in which Job again asserts the injustice of the divine dispensation in general, and in particular the fact that God is punishing him severely although he knows that Job is innocent.

Eleventh day.—§ 37. Read Job 11:5-9 and consider the fact that Zophar goes so far as to say that God is after all overlooking the sum of Job's sin and not punishing him as much as he deserves. Read Job's reply, 13:7-12, noting his profound insight, notwithstanding the stress and turmoil of his soul. Though he cannot understand the administration of God, he nevertheless feels certain that God will not look with the least degree of allowance upon one who approaches him in any other than a spirit of absolute honesty and sincerity. Read vss. 13-16, in which in this same spirit of confidence he asserts his determination to state his whole mind whatever the consequences may be, and at the same time his own conviction that his personal integrity will find recognition in the mind of God.

Twelfth day.—§ 38. The second cycle of the debate, as the first, is opened by Eliphaz. Read Job 15:1-13 and observe the difference of spirit on the part of Eliphaz as compared with his words on his first appearance in chap. 4.

Thirteenth day.—Read 15:22-35. Is there any significance in the fact that Eliphaz devotes the latter and greater part of his address to the fate of the wicked? Is he not, by implication at least, putting Job in that class and striving to frighten him into goodness?

Fourteenth day.—Read Job 16:14-22, observing that Job does not diminish his anger against God or his certainty of his own righteousness; but he passes from these thoughts to the higher and more daring thought that, after all, despite the appearance of things, which is against him, God will at length declare himself on his side.

Fifteenth day.—§ 39. Read 18:1-8, noting that Bildad now has nothing but words of reproach and terror for Job. Read 19:4-10, in which Job reasserts his conviction that God is the source of all his trouble. Read vss. 13-20, in which Job pathetically sets forth his wretched state, deserted by all his friends and kinsmen, and 21, 22, in which Job in the agony of his soul casts himself upon the mercy of his friends.

Sixteenth day.—Read vss. 23-27, observing how Job, longing for an enduring testimonial to his own integrity, passes from that thought to the conviction that he has such a guaranty in God himself, whom he is sure that he shall see ultimately as champion of his cause; and vss. 28, 29, in which he drops from this height of faith to a lower plane upon which he threatens the friends with the wrath of God.

Seventeenth Day.—§ 40. Read 20:4-6 and 26-29, in which Zophar again declares the fate of the wicked.

Eighteenth day.—§ 41. In chap. 21 Job closes the second cycle of the debate. Read vss. 5–10, noting that Job has reverted to his former state of dissatisfaction and cites facts showing that the government of the world on God's part is unjust. Read vss. 17–21, where he again challenges the correctness of the friend's interpretation of the world, declaring that things are exactly as they should not be. In vss. 29–34 Job pictures the end of the wicked man in a way exactly contrary to that in which the friends have been describing the wicked man's lot.

[*To be concluded*]

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the general divisions of the Book of Job?
2. What is the subject of the test represented in the prologue? How is the plan carried out?
3. What is Job's state of mind at the opening of the *poem*, and through what medium does the author represent the comfort of the religion of his contemporaries?
4. What theory have the friends of Job regarding suffering?
5. How do they try to explain Job's condition in view of his confidence in his own integrity?
6. Into what grouping do their speeches fall?
7. Name some distinguishing thought (*a*) of the Eliphaz speeches, (*b*) of those by Bildad, (*c*) of those by Zophar.
8. With what determination on the part of Job does the first cycle of speeches close?
9. What is the attempt of the friends in the second cycle of speeches?
10. What fact, supreme in the mind of Job, do they persistently ignore?
11. What has Job's experience led him to conclude concerning the lot of the wicked in this world?
12. What effect must such a belief have upon the theory of a just God?
13. Where does Job continually conclude that the responsibility for his suffering rests?
14. Why could not Job feign repentance?
15. What were the virtues to which Job rightfully laid claim, and which, if any, could the friends dispute?
16. What conclusion concerning all men was their only resource?
17. What element in contemporary thought does Elihu represent?
18. What is the purpose and effect of the Jehovah speeches with which the poem closes?
19. Does the book answer the question, "Why are the righteous permitted to suffer?"
20. Does it help the sufferer to bear his calamities then and now? If so, how?